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GREATER FLEXIBILITY IN HIGH-SCHOOL WORK

I

FOR more than ten years the writer has endeavored to awaken interest in the necessity of providing greater flexibility in the work of the public schools. Elsewhere¹ attention has been given to the matter of greater elasticity in the method of grading primary and grammar classes; therefore, in this connection, that subject is considered only so far as it affects high-school work. This effort to provide greater flexibility in the work of the higher grades, and more elasticity in the method of classification in all the grades, was made because of the conviction that the American children have a right to expect that, in the higher grades, the work should be suited to their taste and their needs; and that in all the grades, from the lowest to the highest, they should be left free to go forward as far and as fast as individual ability and opportunity will permit. This is the high ideal upon which our grand republic is founded. It is for this reason that the system of education, developed upon American soil, under American institutions and for American needs, should be different from the system of education in any other country. For four hundred years we have been educating with our backs to the future. It is time we face around. We have no remote past, and our vast

¹ See author's book on *The Grading of Schools*.

present is but the beginning of a prodigious future. A nation is strong in proportion as its individuals are strong; wherefore comes the necessity of ministering to the needs of the individuals and of developing those powers inherent in each. Never before have conditions been so favorable for the self-unfolding and the self-realization of the individual. It is the existence of this condition, alone, in our own country that confers on America all the worth it possesses. It is solely because, for the first time in the world's history, the social and political conditions offered are such that the individual may realize the divinity within him and be free to expand. This is the American ideal which has the supreme claim upon us. It is this which must, sooner or later, dominate our entire educational system.

Careful observers of educational trend agree that at last there is a marked disposition to demand of the schools greater flexibility in the selection of subject-matter and in the method of organization. The appeal for greater freedom in the selection of subjects in the higher schools is almost as urgent as the demand for more pliancy in the method of classification in all the grades. That the importance of securing greater flexibility is felt generally is shown by the fact that there can scarcely be found a program of any local, state, or national educational meeting, which does not provide for the consideration of this subject. For the past several years the superintendents' department of the National Educational Association has given special attention to the more flexible grading; and, at its February meeting in Chicago, one half a day was devoted to the discussion of methods of securing greater flexibility in the method of organization. Those who attended the meetings of the National and other educational associations will agree that not only were the sessions which considered this subject the largest and most enthusiastic, but that they were also the most valuable meetings of the sessions.

That the blighting effects of the usual plan upon the majority of the pupils is generally appreciated by thoughtful educators will be apparent from the following: Several years ago, under the direction of the United States Commissioner of Education, a

number of questions bearing upon this subject were sent to the superintendents of several hundred cities. To these questions five hundred and sixty-five answers were received. As these answers came from those who knew exactly what was being done and were largely responsible for the methods of organization in common use, a consideration of some of the conclusions reached cannot fail to be beneficial in the study of this important problem.

1. "Is it sufficient to classify with intervals of a year's work in grade of advancement between the classes, or ought the intervals to be made as small as can be done and secure classes of the normal size—say twenty to thirty pupils in each? Less than 14 per cent. favored the class interval of a year. Why, then, should it be used by the majority of schools? It is claimed, with truth, that some boards of education prevent their superintendents from doing what they know to be best. Is it not time that those in charge of the schools should be left free to work for the best interests of the children?"

2. "Is it the natural effect of classifying with intervals of a year or more between classes, that the bright pupils are held back and not given work enough to develop their capacity, while the teacher is obliged to expend the greater part of his time on the slow and less competent pupils?" Less than seven answered "No" to this question. Not 7 per cent. of five hundred and sixty-five dared defend the usual plan, though most of them were using it. Not 7 per cent. could deny that with the yearly interval "the bright pupils are held back and not given enough work to do to develop their capacity," yet this plan is in general use. It seems past belief, but it is only too true. Is it any wonder that some educators, willing to risk the everlasting condemnation of critics, who care more for their own convenience than for the interests of the children, denounce in unmeasured terms this outrage upon the defenceless children?"

3. "Under the system of year intervals between classes, is not the progress of the whole school kept down to the pace of the slowest and weakest pupils?" Less than 9 per cent. say that the usual plan does not compel all to walk in intellectual lock-step

with the slowest pupils. Surely it is now time that every person responsible for the organization of the schools, not only favors a change to some more sensible method, but also works earnestly for the establishment of a more rational plan.

4. "Does not this system discourage the less mature and sluggish minds of a class, while it wastes the opportunities of the bright minds?" Less than 9 per cent. were willing to deny that this plan does "discourage the less mature and waste the opportunities of the bright minds," and yet this method survives. Survives? Yes, and until lately was in almost universal use. More than that, it is even now in use, not only in the very large majority of cities and towns, but probably even in the majority of those systems represented by these superintendents who have thus condemned it unreservedly.

The request for greater freedom in the selection of courses and subjects, seems to have come, in great part, from the universities and colleges above; and principally affects the high and other secondary schools. The demand for greater elasticity in method of classification, which now seems to be rising spontaneously in every part of the country, is caused by the urgent needs of the primary and grammar grades; for it is in these grades that the need of more flexibility is greatest and the blighting effects of the usual methods most disastrous.

Of the many perplexing problems which confront those who are responsible for the organization and administration of our grand public schools, no other is so perplexing as this one, no other is of so much interest to parents who are solicitous for the proper education of their children; no other should be of such immediate interest to principals and teachers, who have been compelled to work under the present medieval method, which has long outlived its usefulness; no other is such a source of worry to wide awake superintendents interested in the improvements of the schools. The fact is that the methods which were intended to faithfully serve the interests of the children, have long since become their tyrannical masters. Already there are rising, from every part of our land, murmurings which foretell the coming of a storm of protest against the system which gives so

little attention to individual differences and conditions, under which pupils work.

All must admit that teachers vary greatly in knowledge, power, skill, and in many other ways affecting their efficiency. None dare deny that the children of every grade differ widely in age, in acquirements, in aptitude, in physical endurance, in power of attention, in home advantages, in the rate of mental development, in time of entering school, in regularity of attendance, and in many other ways affecting their progress. Yet, because of the manner of grading, the work and promoting the graded school of today keeps all the children of each grade in intellectual lockstep, not only month after month, but year after year, for their whole school lives. Children are not alike and we have no reason to believe that the Almighty intended they should be made alike. Why then put them in educational mills and attempt to grind them out alike, crushing out that individuality which He meant as a guide to their education and to their usefulness, and not a hindrance thereto? Who can give any good reason why we should labor to produce uniformity of taste, uniformity of character, uniformity of ability, or uniformity of aspirations? Is not individuality of more importance than evenness of classification? Is not individuality the divinity of the child? Should it not be watched for and discovered, that it may be carefully studied, and, when along proper lines, lovingly guarded and prayerfully developed? Does not biography teach us that those only have become distinguished who have developed a love for work on particular lines? Since life's success depends, in so great a degree, on the fortunate finding of what the pupil is best fitted to do, surely we should spare no pains in trying to find the right direction and in securing a system which will make possible the turning of the young feet towards the proper path. For a pupil to leave the high school with no definite plan concerning his life's work is a great misfortune. Indeed, it is sad to see so many conscientious teachers and parents giving not the least attention to the pupil's efforts at self direction, unless it be to point them out as dangerous and, therefore, to be frowned out of existence, if possible. At the end of school life, he is too

often turned adrift, with the expectation that he will instantly find, without assistance, what he should have had much help in discovering. The system of electives in college is felt to be right and wise, but it often fails because the student has not had any occasion or opportunity to consider on what line he can best work. The sooner a boy hears his future trade or profession calling to him from the distance, the surer will be his road to it and the better the success he is likely to have. Then why not allow more specialization in the high schools? Why postpone it until he goes to a college, university, or to fight life's battle? This specialization need not be in the narrow sense which cuts out everything that does not visibly touch the future business, but in the true sense of ministering to the special powers or the peculiar circumstances of the individual. Would this not give us men and women better educated and better equipped for their life's work? Would it not keep in school many who have come to the end of their ability in certain subjects? Will not a variety of aims and occupations have a quickening effect upon all, especially when they come into contact with each other in other exercises. When we consider this matter thoughtfully need we wonder the usual iron-clad system which, regardless of the many differences, tends to cast all minds in the same mold, and subject all to the same treatment, for the same length of time, and test all in the same way, on the same work at the same time, is objected to because it demands so much uniformity, that many are forced to stop school and many more who graduate, do not get the work they should and are too long getting what they receive? Let us not wonder that, from all sides there comes a demand for greater flexibility so that it will not be necessary for the teachers to attempt to overcome, not only the differences of physical ability and physical environments, but even the differences in mental ability and mental predilection. Let us not wonder that, on all sides, thoughtful educators are studying this problem as never before, and are planning to replace the Procrustean beds of grades by something more elastic. Something which will make it possible for the teacher to fit the work to the pupil instead of forcing her to make the pupil fit the work. Surely it

is time we cease condemning the teacher, because in spite of all the differences, she cannot produce symmetrical nonentities. Surely, the poor teacher, limited in power and by conditions, should not be criticised because she cannot overcome the differences predetermined by the Almighty. This demand for greater flexibility in work above the grammar grades, and for greater pliancy in method of classification in all the grades cannot be neglected. It must be given careful consideration. Some protest against anything which savors of criticism, but has the time not come when we should speak frankly, where the interests of our schools and the welfare of the pupils is concerned? Surely, the friends of our public schools, which are increasing in efficiency at an ever increasing rate, should discuss the defeats of the present system and work earnestly for its improvement!

In the consideration of this important problem we must not forget that its solution is neither easy nor simple. The first, and perhaps the easiest step, is the preparation of one course of study. The making of the single course of study is, in itself, a severe test of the highest qualifications of the best prepared. It requires a careful and exhaustive study of educational values. Without this it will be impossible to select such branches as will, in the most effective manner, develop the substantial as well as the formal activities of the child. This will mean that we must start with the study of the brain and mind, formulate all we know of their functions and the natural order in which these activities succeed each other, in the development of the normal individual, from the beginning of life to its end. Having made certain of this, it will be necessary to provide a course which will work in harmony with the natural sequences of human nature, instead of violating them at every step, as we do now. It will mean that we cease developing but a part of man's faculties and aim to produce a man, the whole of whose powers have been exercised into harmonious life. Each must be taken at the right psychological moment. The attempt must be made to cultivate all the good and repress all the evil inclinations, preserving the right balance of all, until special aptitude for particular forms of activity become apparent. When these

special aptitudes appear, it will then be necessary to provide, from this point, several equally good courses. This will necessitate an exhaustive study of equivalents that the courses prepared may not be narrowing, yet may foster a healthy growth along particular lines. The satisfactory course of study of the future must do away with a one-sided intellectual development. It must deny some of the claims of the classicists, who would educate one half of man and leave the other half withered. It would do no better for our scientific friends, who would electrify the dead half and then proceed to let the opposite side die; thus the man could hop through life on one side instead of on the other. It would cease to hold the mirror to the present or to the past, for education would no longer follow and reflect the great historic changes in society, as it has done in the past. From the earliest teachings of the primitive savages to the present, education has simply reflected the last phase of society. Because of this we have had a succession of one-sided systems of education. From the first to the last, each was but a temporary picture in a series of dissolving views. Each was felt to be all important and all sufficient. Though containing something of value, each proved to be unimportant and insufficient. One after another, all except the last, have passed away. Now the time has come to demand and secure from the educators of our country typical courses, which will be well suited to the development of intelligent American citizens. Let it be an American system in fact, and not a poor imitation of one suited to the needs of some other country.

As before indicated, the demand for greater freedom in the selection of courses and subjects came from the colleges; yet the first colleges were founded for the purpose of giving a liberal culture, and not, to any extent, for the purpose of providing work upon special lines. This was true of all the colleges of New England, the cradle of American education, as well as in most, if not in all, of the other earlier colleges. Their early growth was the result of conditions inherent in our American life. For many years even Harvard and Yale felt neither the necessity nor ability of maintaining more than one course. As wealth

increased, greater facilities were provided to meet the increasing demands, so that the curriculum became so extensive that selection became necessary. It is important that the teacher should remember that the developing child passes through most of the periods through which the race has passed in its march from barbarism to the highest civilization. If she fails to do so, she can scarcely bear the barbarous conduct of the sometimes young savages. Much less can she deal properly with many of their moods, which are relics of bygone ages. For similar reasons it is important that those who are working with developing high schools should remember that the high school must also pass through several stages before it can reach the period of full development. Failing to realize this, much discouragement will result; whereas, in all probability the high school has not reached that point in its development which makes it best that it should be different from what it is. Under the existing conditions it may be doing much better than others which seem to be far more advanced.

To what extent then can or should high-school courses be flexible? In view of the fact that so many have already solved this problem for themselves, it hardly seems necessary to give more than brief consideration to this question. However, in the hope that it may be helpful to those still struggling with the subject, the writer's experience is given. Five years ago, when the writer accepted responsibility in connection with the high school under consideration, it had a three years' English course, which all pupils of the school were compelled to pursue; no opportunity being given to vary the work or to finish the course in less than the prescribed time. Proximity to New York City, which had no public high school, the strong interests of good private schools, and other very potent reasons which need not be mentioned, reduced the interest in the public high school to such a low ebb, that many of the people felt that no high school course should be provided at public expense. The unusual financial condition of the city required that the schools be conducted at from one third to one half the per capita cost in other school systems of the same and adjoining counties. Considering

these and other limiting conditions, the difficulty of providing greater flexibility will become apparent to those of experience. It will also show the propriety if not the necessity of having reached the desired end by the slow but sure process of evolution, rather than by a sudden revolution.

Those arranging courses of study should keep in view the high ideal of the ultimate end of education. It is certainly not for the present but for the future; not so much for what may appear in the child, but rather for what will make for character in the man. The superiority of man's character is determined not merely by his intellectual grasp, nor even alone by his ethical insight, but it is largely determined by his power for effective action towards right and desirable ends. Any study, group of studies or method, is beneficial or harmful, in proportion as it contributes to, or fails to contribute towards developing these characteristics.

In outlining courses for developing the high school, there should first be provided a finishing course. The high school is rightly considered the people's college. Supported by all the people for their children, it should first minister to the needs of the majority, who cannot go farther than the high school. This certainly seems to be in accordance with the reasonable demand that, in the expenditure of public money the attempt be made to secure the greatest good for the greatest number. Though contrary to the contention of many, it seems right that this course, as well as other courses, should be no higher than the large majority can easily reach. Many who have gotten a few ideas from the German gymnasium, which is an illustration of the law of the survival of the fittest, have urged the adoption of the German ideal in our own schools. This has caused many to stop on reaching the high school and many more to fall by the wayside in their passage through the school. The small proportion graduating furnishes a strong argument for those opposed to all high schools, even though the few prize graduates may increase the prestige of a particular high school. Some time ago I visited a friend who was noted for his ability to raise prize peaches of all varieties. As the neighboring peach growers

had the same facilities as my friend, I was curious to know the secret of his success. After some hesitation, he took me through his orchard and explained the whole process in a few words, by saying, "If I want prize peaches of any kind I shake off all but a couple of dozen early in the spring. It is expensive but I get my prize peaches, for all the strength goes into the few." Is there not a warning in this for many of us?

Having provided for the large majority, attention should be given to the largest minority of pupils, and the attempt should be made to give all the best that the community is willing to provide. In every community there is a smaller or larger number of pupils who are desirous of attending higher schools. If preparation for these higher schools cannot be made in the home high school, very few would be able to attend any advanced school. The high school which can do more than provide for the majority may well make provision for these. Many would place this as the highest function of the public high school, but it does seem that it should not be considered, primarily, as a feeder for college, unless the interest of the majority of the pupils demands that it be so considered. The colleges are quite willing to have the high schools made preparatory schools; and some are even so unselfish as to be willing to allow the high-school teachers to give all the hard and thorough drill which belongs to the work of the college. Is it any wonder that many of the friends of the public schools enter forcible protests against shaping all the work for the few who expect to go to college?

Experience proves that a large number of those prepared for the high school do not enter, for the reason that circumstances are such that they cannot expect to be able to finish a four years' course of any kind. Conditions over which they have no control demand that they must soon become bread-winners for themselves, if not for others also. A great many of these could manage to go to school for a couple of years if there should be offered a course which promises some practical help for the near and trying future, when they must fight life's battle alone. For these, there should be provided a commercial course of two or three years. Here is where the trouble begins.

Our classical friends insist that it is impossible for any one to receive a good education without having studied Latin or Greek. In holy horror they raise their hands and eyes and warn us to beware of the utilitarian spirit of the age. They remind us that it was through Greece and Rome that the present civilization came; that at their flames we kindled the torches of our institutions; that in our civil and political life we live as did the Romans; that our esthetical ideals came from beyond Rome—even from Greece. Though all this, and more, is true, yet there is reason for challenging the claims of Latin and Greek, and for asserting that neither is absolutely necessary for the education of a gentleman, or for the proper development of all the mental faculties. Latin or Greek is valuable for developing memory, concrete reasoning, logical expression, literary taste, imagination, and social reasoning. The substitution of French and German may secure those of these desirable ends which are not reached just as well by other subjects of the course.

In addition to these courses, many schools will find it practicable to arrange other courses on different lines. But no matter what courses are arranged, provision should be made for greater freedom in the election of particular branches when there is good reason for such election. When this is done even, the smaller high schools can have many of the advantages of the larger. In addition to the regular work, it will be very easy to give pupils special opportunities of taking advanced work in language, in mathematics, drawing, and in other subjects. This may make a little trouble for principal and teacher, but where the best interest of the pupils demands it, it should be done, as the schools are for the children rather than for the teachers.

Again, no matter what course is selected, the effort should be made to make it possible for a pupil to change from one course to another when there is good reason for so doing. Changing conditions will effect many. Some will find they are not taking the work for which they are best fitted, even though great care has been taken in determining what course they should pursue. Others will develop aptitude along special lines

at a later period in their work. All those who can be provided for should be taken care of.

In this article attention has been called to the necessity of greater freedom in the selection of courses and subjects. In the second article the matter of greater elasticity in method of organization will be discussed, and the attempt will be made to show how more flexibility in method of classification may easily be secured.

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(To be continued)